

THE EARLY DUCK SEASON OPENER

Three years ago, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offered northern states the option of opening their regular waterfowl season a week earlier than was previously allowed. For North Dakota, it was the culmination of some 40 years of efforts to try to get more days of hunting for its waterfowlers.

The state Game and Fish Department eagerly took advantage of the extra seven days the Fish and Wildlife Service provided as part of a three-year experiment. That three-year trial ended last fall. Now, as state and federal waterfowl managers are finalizing the 2005 seasons, an early opener is again an option for northern states.

Changing Federal Frameworks

A framework is something like a boundary established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to manage duck and goose hunting seasons. Frameworks for each of the four flyways – Atlantic, Mississippi, Central and Pacific – include the earliest possible start date, the latest possible end date, and the number of days each state can have their season open between the starting and ending date. Frameworks also include maximum daily bag limits a state can allow.

Northern states typically open their waterfowl seasons on the earliest possible date, Southern states shoot for ending on the last possible open date, and mid-latitude states like Kansas and Missouri usually set their seasons somewhere in the middle.

In March 2002, the FWS published in the Federal Register a proposal to extend the frameworks states use to set their waterfowl seasons. The Federal Register is the official daily publication for rules, proposed rules and notices of federal agencies and organizations, and that marked the first time the prospect of an earlier duck opener for Northern states was offered as an official proposal, even though the idea had been debated among the FWS and many states for years.

The discussion spanned five decades because duck hunters in northern parts of the United States felt short-changed by the number of days they actually get to hunt versus their southern counterparts. For instance, while federal frameworks allowed a 74-day duck season in North Dakota in 2002, an October 21 cold front froze up most of the potholes in the northern part of the state.

Even with the early duck opener on September 21, half the state had an effective duck season of about 30 days. Had the season opened on September 28, as it would have under the previous framework, the northern half of the state would have had decent hunting potential for a little more than three weeks, or less than half the days the season was actually open.

Southern states, on the other hand, typically have open water year-round, but little waterfowl production. Duck numbers build as the season progresses and ducks migrate from the north.

Under the previous federal framework, the earliest a state could open its regular duck season was the Saturday closest to October 1. In North Dakota, that was a range of dates from September 28 to October 4. The latest a Southern state could have its season open was the Sunday nearest January 20. All states had to establish their duck seasons within these two boundaries.

While Northern states have asked for earlier openers, Southern states have exerted significant political pressure on the Fish and Wildlife Service to get later duck season closing dates. In 2001, northern biologists and waterfowl hunters were outraged when political pressure forced the service to propose a season extension for Southern states without a like number of days at the beginning of the season for Northern states.

In 2002, the FWS allowed Northern states to open their regular duck season on the Saturday closest to September 24, which gives North Dakota a range of the 21st through 27th. On the other end, Southern states got their season extension and have been able to keep their seasons open through the last Sunday in January.

Since 1995, state and federal waterfowl managers have used a process called Adaptive Harvest Management as the basis for setting duck seasons. It's a sophisticated statistical model that uses spring pond and breeding mallard numbers as the criteria for setting season lengths and bag limits.

Depending on FWS survey results, the framework packages are called liberal, moderate and restrictive. Details for the Central Flyway are as follows:

Liberal

Maximum season length: 74 days
Daily limit: 6 ducks including 5 mallards/2 hen mallards
Earliest opening date: Saturday nearest September 24
Latest closing date: Last Sunday in January

Moderate

Maximum season length: 60 days
Daily limit: 6 ducks including 5 mallards/1 hen mallard
Earliest opening date: Saturday nearest September 24
Latest closing date: Last Sunday in January

Restrictive

Maximum season length: 39 days
Daily limit: 3 ducks including 3 mallards/1 hen mallard
Earliest opening date: Saturday nearest October 1
Latest closing date: Sunday nearest January 20



"Brown ducks" like these mid-September mallards (two drakes, one hen) are probably the biggest knock on the earlier duck season opener in North Dakota, but most state hunters like the extra week of hunting opportunity.

For 2005, the extended opening and closing dates are only available if the liberal or moderate package is triggered by the number of spring ponds and breeding mallards. As waterfowl managers from across the continent met in Washington D.C. in late July, expectations were that this fall's duck season would fall into the liberal package.

If that happens, North Dakota will again have the opportunity to open its duck and goose seasons on Saturday, September 24, instead of the Saturday nearest October 1. While the Game and Fish Department doesn't have to open its duck and goose seasons early, Department administrators are strong supporters of this extra week and will take it if it's available.

Some duck hunters, however, have reservations about the additional early week.

Here's a look at the early duck season opener and some of the issues involved, From Both Sides.

One Side

- An earlier season opener provides much greater opportunity for hunting blue-winged teal. While blue-wings are the most common breeding duck in North Dakota – in some years they account for 30-40 percent of all breeding ducks in the state – they migrate early and are seldom plentiful when waterfowl season previously opened. An earlier opener gives hunters a better chance to harvest some of these birds before they leave the state.

- Wood ducks, which are also early migrants, are numerous along some of the state's rivers, including the Missouri, Red, Sheyenne and James. An early opener provides more opportunity for people who want to specifically hunt wood ducks.

- While Northern and Southern states have the same duck season lengths, North Dakota typically has few ducks for the latter one-third or more of the season. The extra week is seven additional hunting days in North Dakota before freeze-up.

- An extra week in September is typically nicer weather, and is pleasant for younger hunters.

- With an early opener, hunters may have chances to help farmers keep ducks and geese out of small grain that is swathed but late in being harvested.

- Since 2002, North Dakota has chosen to allow only residents to hunt waterfowl during the additional extra week. This provision has been popular with resident hunters.

- Canadian provinces north of North Dakota open their duck seasons starting September 1 or shortly thereafter.

The Other Side

- In mid-to-late September, few ducks are fully colored and it is more difficult for hunters to identify species, and drakes and hens.

- By starting the regular duck season on September 24 in 2005, it pushes the special youth waterfowl hunting weekend another week earlier, back to September 17. At that time, most ducks are even less colored out, and most of the hunters are relatively inexperienced at identifying even full-plumaged birds.

- Early ducks, with the exception of most blue-winged teal, often have "pinfeathers," which makes them difficult to pick and clean.

- Some young-of-the-year ducks have just learned to fly in mid-September and are very susceptible to decoying. In years like 2005, when good water conditions can extend breeding efforts into late summer, some young ducks may not be able to fly at all until late September.

- Farmers may still be harvesting grain in mid-September and may not be allow hunters on their land, or to start hunting themselves.

- Many ducks shot during an extra early week could be resident birds that either nested or were hatched in North Dakota, and not migrants.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at ndgf@state.nd.us; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.